'Student-as-Teacher': An Approach to Encouraging More Positive Learning Outcomes in a Research Skills Classroom

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Introduction

Second-year students in the Department of British and American Cultural Studies at Chukyo University are required to complete a one-semester seminar course aimed at developing efficient research skills. Within this context a central aim of the course is to encourage students to take greater personal responsibility for, and control of, their learning, and to become more independent, responsible and autonomous learners. For a number of reasons, in previous courses this goal has proved difficult to achieve. This paper describes how a relatively small shift in focus and structure in this seminar, introduced recently, now crucially emphasizes the role of 'student-as-teacher' and is showing early promise in terms of the kinds of outcomes initially hoped for.

Context: The Seminar Course

Aside from the development of efficient research skills, a further aim of the course is to introduce students to a range of historical or socio-cultural themes and issues related to one of the countries whose language they study. This particular seminar focus is on key developments in UK pop/rock from 1960 to approximately 2000 and how these relate to socio-cultural developments over the period. The themes serve as the vehicle for students to work on their research skills. The current course plan requires students in pairs to choose a theme/genre prompted by the teacher (e.g. 'The British Invasion and Swinging London') to research over the next seven weeks or so, with the final aim of making a formal 15-20 minute presentation of their research and then writing a research paper describing their research. Students are given Research Task worksheets every week which guide them to the kinds of information needed to gain as full an understanding as possible of their theme. On returning to class each week, students are required to work in pairs or small groups to give

oral updates or informal presentations (plus discussion) of their growing body of research data.

The Problem: Course Structure, Student-Centredness and Affect

As noted in the introduction above, earlier versions of the seminar course often failed to achieve desired results in terms of student autonomy and self-reliance. Analysis of the problem suggested that the main reason for this lay in the structure of the course itself. On the one hand, it did not allow for sufficient student-centredness, on the other hand it reinforced certain negative affective factors such as students' self-efficacy, motivation and degree of engagement.

The course as originally conceived placed the teacher at the centre of the classroom as the primary provider of thematic content (short lectures from week 1) and students in the relatively passive role of following up and feeding back on lecture topics in their weekly research. In this sense, there seemed to be an almost inbuilt contradiction of attempting to encourage more student-centredness on the one hand, yet operating with a course structure which from the outset could only serve to reinforce students' expectations and experiences of a more traditional teacher-centred learning process. These expectations have been well documented: Kern (1995: 76) noting that, '. . . students' beliefs about language learning may be quite well entrenched', and Nunan (1999) pointing to research conducted by Alcorso and Kalantzis which shows that a large number of learners, in the absence of guidance otherwise, will inevitably work according to more traditional views of language and learning.

With the teacher as prime controller and provider of content, students were essentially assigned a fairly passive and secondary role in this important step of the research process, and it became clear that this worked significantly against, not only the aim of greater student-centredness, but also against the development of positive affective factors deemed necessary for success on the course, such as heightened self-efficacy, motivation and engagement, and willingness to take risks and accept appropriate levels of challenge. In short, the structure did not effectively permit students to, 'build confidence through activities which try to 'push' learners slightly beyond their existing proficiency by engaging them in tasks which are stimulating, which are problematic but which are achievable too. (Tomlinson 1999: 9). Following the teacher's initial lecture introducing a theme, students would simply conduct follow-up research on aspects of the theme already given. In this, there was little room for students to attempt from the first class a fuller self-exploration of a theme, or to develop their own conceptions (rather than perhaps feel constrained by the teacher's own preconcep-

tions) about issues related to it, or indeed about which aspects of the theme they considered sufficiently relevant to include in their later research presentation and research paper.

The Solution: 'Student-as-Teacher' - A More Student-Centred Focus

The solution to the above problems was to re-focus student-teacher roles within a revised course structure. The new course structure is briefly outlined here and a rationale provided in the following section.

The course is no longer teacher-led via a series of lectures in weeks 1-7 as the point de départ for students' follow-up research, and as the key method of teaching the course content/-themes to students. These tasks are now assigned to students, who work in pairs (for increased support) and choose a theme from a list of possible options. In weeks 1-7 pairs research an aspect of their theme suggested by the teacher and complete a Research Task worksheet. Research tasks include: Influences in the life of a key artist; socio-cultural issues; impact and legacy, and so on.

The key difference from the previous structure here is that the teacher now plays a supporting role in students' growing body of data each week, rather than the former leading role. The growing body of research content (and input for teaching other students) comes primarily from the students, not, as before, from the teacher. In addition, each week students must give informal presentations of, or 'teach', their research data to other classmates, who take notes and ask questions. The teacher's task here is to fill in any gaps in the research data or guide students towards important information they may have missed. Thus, students have effectively taken over much of the role previously assumed by the teacher, with all that this implies in terms of increased responsibility, challenge, and opportunity for more active and effective learning.

In weeks 8-9, pairs make a 15-20 minute formal presentation of their research to date. They also prepare a 10-question test for their classmates to complete at the end of their presentation ('lecture'). The test questions paper is helpful to presenters since it compels them to be clear about the content they have selected in order to create a clear flow of questions linked to the development of their theme. For their classmates the test questions (which they receive before the presentation) form an outline that aids comprehension. The presenters collect, grade and return the test papers to students in the next class after the teacher gives a brief check. Once again, the teacher's role is more akin to a short gap-fill lecture to ensure nothing important is omitted from the content students have researched and presented.

Rationale/Benefits

The call for a more learner-centred pedagogy is now well-established (Kumaravadivelu 1993; Nunan 1999; Tudor 1993) and for this reason alone, the changes outlined above are justified in light of the strongly student-centred aims of the course. This apart, there are a number of more specific positive benefits that result from the 'student-as --teacher' approach.

'Student-as-Teacher'

First, the idea of 'student-as-teacher', or involving students as much as possible in their learning by assigning responsibility for as many aspects of the course as possible, (in this case, via content generation; 'teaching'; 'testing' of other students, and so on) is well-established, (Barkhuizen 1998; Christison and Krahnke 1986) as a powerful means of increasing motivation, interest and engagement. Block (1991) refers to these latter features in terms of input materials, but the concept seems equally applicable to the notion of where primary responsibility for providing input content is most efficiently placed in order to achieve the best outcomes — with the teacher or with the student.

Students and Content Selection

Next, as Greene et al (1997) have noted, in order to facilitate truly effective learning, it is not enough for teachers simply to base content on their own assessment of learners' needs, but rather to offer learners a more direct role in topic selection. Although the seminar general theme options are suggested by the teacher, students are encouraged to freely explore their themes and focus on what appears most relevant and interesting to them, within the context of what is deemed historically correct or valid. In this sense it is the student who has most control over content selection and development in his / her role as 'teacher'. Students are hopefully being guided in this way to make more informed and qualitative decisions about content on the grounds of relevance and interest for themselves and also for their classmates to whom they must teach the material.

Who Should Give the Lecture?

The issue of control over content also has implications for the whole question of the most appropriate means to introduce content in the first place. As stated earlier, the seminar course has two main requirements: students should develop effective research skills and also develop some knowledge and understanding of selected historical / socio-cultural themes. The latter is envisaged as a short teacher lecture with follow-up task for students to develop

both research skills and knowledge of the theme. This traditional approach can be problematic for several reasons, however.

First, a 20-minute lecture in students' L2 on a theme that is almost certainly new to students can prove to be a cognitive challenge beyond the level of some students. Motivation and engagement can progressively suffer as a result.

Second, whilst the 20-minute lecture might be over-long cognitively, in the sense of providing sufficient information to help students grasp the bigger picture of their theme and related issues it is often not enough.

Third, linguistically-speaking, students with weak listening comprehension skills may baulk at a 20-minute listening task. Given that this teacher lecture content was previously being viewed as essential foundation information from which students should develop research skills and knowledge of their theme we can see that almost before the course is underway there is huge potential for the kinds of mismatches that can occur between teacher intention and learner interpretation (Block 1998; Kumaravadivelu 1991; Spratt 1999)

Self-efficacy and Students' Self-perceptions

Finally, the 'student-as-teacher' framework for the research skills class has benefits in terms of students' perceptions of what they are, or are not, capable of achieving, or their degree of self-efficacy. Bandura defines (perceived) self-efficacy as:

> . . . people's judgements of their capabilities to organize and execute courses of action required to attain designated types of performances. It is concerned not with the skills on has but with the judgements of what one can do with whatever skills one possesses (cited in Lee and Bobko 1994: 364)

This definition, with its emphasis on perceptions of ability, rather than actual ability, is arguably the most significant factor among the many variables influencing learner progress and success, since it opens up the possibility of developing such perceptions in productive ways, for example, by encouraging goal setting for increased performance (Templin et al, 1999: Yang 1999) and also by gradually guiding learners toward greater overall control and responsibility for their learning (Williams and Burden 1997).

For these reasons, in this type of class at least, with its particular aims and goals, there is surely a case for arguing that the 'student-as-teacher' format can be effective, since it can avoid problems of the type under discussion. Students have considerable control of content selection from the beginning and can therefore work more comfortably at their own level and to their own strengths. From this, it is to be expected that motivation and engagement with their theme should be far easier to maintain. In addition, compared with the short

teacher lectures, through their research tasks and later in-class interaction tasks with classmates students have more time and opportunity each week to gain a better understanding of their theme and then to be better placed to select comprehensible content appropriate to their goal of 'teaching' this, and ultimately preparing a final presentation and research paper.

Conclusion

This paper has described how positive improvements were obtained on a research skills course from a relatively small change of course structure and resulting teacher-student role reversals. This new 'student-as-teacher' approach has resulted in a more student-centred environment, increased motivation and engagement with course themes, and a more appropriate level of cognitive challenge for students.

These changes were introduced only recently and although initial results are encouraging the positive outcomes discussed above need to be monitored over a longer term in order to gain a more reliable picture of the situation. It must also be said that, positive outcomes apart, this is often the most difficult and challenging class for students and it will be necessary to respond flexibly and sensitively to new students taking up this challenge in the semester ahead.

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